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The Africanist Dilemma

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De Rycke, Jean-Pierre. *Africanisme et modernisme : la peinture et la photographie d'inspiration coloniale en Afrique centrale (1920-1940)*, Bruxelles : Peter Lang : Archives & Musée de la Littérature, 2010, (Documents pour l'histoire des francophonies/Afrique)

L'Afrique rêvée : images d'un continent à « l'âge d'or » de la colonisation, 1920-1940, Bruxelles : Racine, 2010

- 1 By way of controversy and great steps backwards, memories associated with slavery, colonization and exhibitions resulting therefrom are influencing, for better or for worse, the current state of public policies, cultural events, and draft laws. The Musée du Quai Branly, first and foremost, the Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, above all, and the MuCEM all indirectly express the tricky negotiation of the memory of "others" within the nation state. If such challenges go hand-in-hand with lively debates about immigration, they are vestiges of the modernism that has seen the development of an unambiguous historical consciousness, one of whose episodes is retraced by Jean-Pierre De Rycke, based on the history of Belgium.
- 2 The extraction of the Congo's resources, during which the Belgian nation fashioned a colonial mentality for itself by dint of mercantilist propaganda, was propped up by fearsome visual interplay. This was the context which saw the various expeditions–Citroën Haardt-Ardouin Dubreuil: the Trans-Saharan (1922-1923), and the Black Cruise (1924-1925)–which foreshadowed the Dakar-Djibouti mission (1931-1933). The Black Cruise was funded by the French Citroën company, and associated automobile industry publicity, capitalism, naturalist studies, and so on; in its odyssey it took on a multi-facetted international Africanist team: taxidermist, painter, topographer, photographer,

naturalist, and director. Although it could not be compared with the Napoleonic military-cum-scientific expedition in Egypt (1798-1801), it nevertheless came in the wake of the Enlightenment imperialist project, whose universalism it borrowed in its encyclopaedic inventorial method. There thus came into being a pictorial and photographic production which interpreted local people, local landscapes, and local imagination in a twofold programme of identification and distancing. The outcome was an Art Deco (today forgotten about) which projected onto African arts the features of Classicism and Primitivism. This obsessive mythology of the past was supposed to inform a new humanism. It stood aloof from the avant-gardes while creating formal affinities with the New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) movement and the so-called Synthetist tendencies. Ethnographic artists like Auguste Mambour, Fernand Allard l'Olivier, Marc Allégret, Hugo Adolf Bernatzik, Alexandre Jacovleff, Fernand Lantoine, Pierre de Vacleroy and Casimir Zagourski all produced a diversified art which tallied with between-the-wars disenchantment, the colonial exhibitions of the 1930s, and the rise of Primitivism, which they fuelled by travels.

- 3 The visual language of Primitivism would bring about their unity. It gave rise to their connection with Paul Gauguin, a connection which Jean-Pierre De Rycke made in the exhibition he devoted to them in the Museum of Fine Arts at Tournai (from 4 December 2010 to 28 April 2011), marking the 50th anniversary of the African independence movement.
- 4 Primitivism was the medium for an exegesis on African arts ranging from *Iskusstvo Negrov* to William Rubin, by way of Carl Einstein, Guillaume Apollinaire, André Salmon, Robert Goldwater, Jean Laude, etc. It is possible to enshrine such a list in Babacar Mbaye Diop's new book, which provides a critical African version, while conceding that the contribution of the former and the latter allows no rejoinder but does not have total conviction either. This young Professor of Philosophy at Dakar University barter with African arts, ancient, traditional and contemporary alike, without overlooking one or two high points in the popular and digital arts. Were his expertise rounded off by imagery, his multidisciplinary approach would probably have shed more light on a critique of colonial ethnography which Jean-Pierre De Rycke's aim to get us to experience the novel adventure of Africanists has failed to develop. But Babacar Mbaye Dioop's major contribution is based on his analysis of African philosophical aesthetics, because we are presented with a between-the-lines criticism of historicism. From the Existentialism of the artistic sign with Léopold Sédar Senghor to its religious dimension with Engelbert Mveng, and from its marginality which is a challenge to modernity with Jean Godefroy Bidima to its plasticity which is writing with Iba Ndiaye Diadji, African aesthetics has trouble staying aloof from the critical compass of Negritude. From this viewpoint, it would seem that these authors have built not so much aesthetic theories as charges against the Africanist discourse and the "colonial library". What is more, their stance straightforwardly calls to mind Edward Said's when he got up in arms against Orientalism, whose plastic vocabulary—as is shown by Jean-Pierre De Rycke—can be compared to Africanism on several levels.
- 5 This turbulence around Method is extended in Charles Didier Gondola's¹ recent attacks against Africanists, in the theoretical dismantling of African research institutions by Jean-Loup Amselle², and in the credit given to this latter by Jean Copans³ who denies that African Social Sciences have achieved their threshold of autonomy. With hindsight, one gets the impression that Africanists and their assailants are now doing battle over

principles, whose purpose they seem to have long forgotten. For it would quite obviously seem that the crucial idea is not to reject an epistemology, nor, incidentally, to completely support it, and even less to construct one from scratch. It is a matter of imposing on it a special experience, just as it also is to inform universalism and modernism in our own way, even if these have gone hand in glove with historicism. This, at least, is the invitation made to us by Dipesh Chakrabarty⁴ and Okwui Enwezor.⁵

- 6 Do the late-in-the-day debates about these issues of memory and theory, and about France's dizzy-making self-psychoanalysis, in the face of a history that is too often repressed (cf. the controversy over the positive role of colonization) not, in the end of the day, call into question the failure and the historical paradoxes of Africanism in the very space of its enunciation?

NOTES

1. Gondola, Charles Didier. *Africanisme : la crise d'une illusion*. Paris : L'Harmattan, 2007
2. Amselle, Jean-Loup. *L'Occident décroché : enquête sur les postcolonialismes*, Paris : Stock, 2008
3. Copans, Jean. *Un Demi-siècle d'africanisme africain : terrains, acteurs et enjeux des sciences sociales en Afrique indépendante*, Paris : Karthala, 2010, (Disputatio)
4. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincialiser l'Europe : la pensée postcoloniale et la différence historique*, Paris : Amsterdam, 2009
5. Enwezor, Okwui. "Modernity and postcolonial ambivalence", in Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Altermodern*, London : Tate Triennial ; Tate. 2009. Cf. also : Enwezor, Okwui, Okeke-Agulu, Chika. *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, Bologna : Damiani, 2009